

University of Alberta Library



0 1620 3042582 9

**DISC IN
POCKET**

University of Alberta

Lessons from a Couch Fort

Furniture for Conversation

by

Allison Murray

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Design

in

Industrial Design

Department of Art and Design

©Allison Jayne Murray


Fall 2011

Edmonton, Alberta

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Libraries to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only. Where the thesis is converted to, or otherwise made available in digital form, the University of Alberta will advise potential users of the thesis of these terms.

FOR COLON LIPS
CHICKEN GOVS

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis and, except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatsoever without the author's prior written permission.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
University of Alberta Library

<https://archive.org/details/Murray2011>

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my incredible parents and their unwavering confidence in me. Thank you for a wonderful childhood.

In loving memory of my father, who showed me what joy and fulfillment there is in meticulous work.

Abstract

My thesis explores the concept of Furniture for Conversation. When designed with people in mind, furniture can positively affect how people converse and socialize, contributing to the level of satisfaction and happiness experienced on a day to day basis. Inspired by the way technology changes the way we communicate, this furniture investigates the intricacies of face to face interaction and socialization. While design theory has placed considerable emphasis on the impact of the built environment on our well-being, I believe that not enough consideration has been placed on the impact of furniture on our emotional lives. I have researched the effect of furniture within the environment and how it can facilitate personal interaction by designing with the attributes of being warm, informal, adaptable, private and close. These furniture projects consider the types of conditions needed for honest and open communication and desirable social interaction. This furniture was influenced and inspired by the simple joy that a couch fort offers. The three projects were designed with a sense of enclosure, reducing stimulus from the outside world while providing privacy. The ability to control privacy is one of the most important types of control we can have, and allows us to open up to the people we trust. The important lesson to take from the couch fort is to make time for playful and private spaces. The element of play in our lives is not to be undermined by the hustle and bustle of the working world. Motivated by the potential influence of furniture on our emotions and inspired by the lessons from a couch fort, these playful explorations of furniture illustrate the importance of the objects we surround ourselves with. By creating warm and inviting spaces which encourage personal interaction and intimate conversation allows people to feel close to one another, adding meaning to our lives.

Acknowledgements

It is with immense gratitude and heartfelt appreciation to my family for their unconditional love, support and inspiring upbringing. Mom, thank you for everything, especially your patience and dedication in teaching me how to sew.

In loving memory of my father, whose death has taught me so much about life, and for showing me what joy and fulfillment there is in meticulous work.

Brennan and Graham, you are amazing brothers and it is comforting to know that you'll always have my back. Thank you to the Labahn family for the countless Sunday night suppers and endless loads of laundry. My dear cousin Dave Shepherd, thank you for all of the late night editing, encouragement and support.

This thesis would not be possible without the guidance and supervision of CezaryGajewski and Rob Lederer, thank you for your invaluable insight. I am grateful to Tim Antoniuk, Daniela Schluter and Marko Zivkovic for being on my defense committee making for an enriching and inspiring rite of passage. I would also like to thank the Department of Art & Design making this research possible through the support of the Masters of Design Scholarship and for the wonderful opportunity to teach.

Words cannot express my gratitude to Ken Horne, Cam Frith and Ray McAdams, without your expertise these projects would not be possible. Greig Rasmussen, thank you for your insight and precious philosophical discussions.

Thank you to Blair Brennan and the gallery staff for all of the help in preparing for the gallery show, you have made a dream come true.

I consider it an honor to have worked with Roman Syniuga at Built to Learn, thank you for the incredible upholstery work, the Tube Couch and Wingbacks would not be the same without your talent.

I am indebted to my colleagues who supported me through this process and the many rounds of grad therapy at the campus pub, especially Jenna Hill for making the race to the finish line incredibly enjoyable. A special thank you goes out to Leslie Robinson for your unwavering faith in me and your inspiring ambition to make a difference in this world. Megan Bertagnolli, it gives me great pleasure in acknowledging your support in this process, especially for the dazzling distractions, amazing adventures and much needed writing critiques.

Thank you to all of those who challenged me through this process, making me a stronger person. A special thank you goes out to the burst steam pipe in my office for illustrating the importance of waterproof ink and the impermanence of life.

Table of Contents

2-	Dedication
3-	Abstract
4-	Acknowledgments
6-	Table of Contents
7-	List of Images
8-	Section One: Introduction
14-	Section Two: Design Criteria &Definitions
20-	Case Study: Lessons from a Couch Fort
24-	Description of work: Tube Couch
27-	Description of work: Wingbacks
30-	Description of work: Round Loungers
33-	Section Three: Design Conclusion
36-	Bibliography
38-	Images

List of Images

Figure 1: The Tube Couch

Figure 2: The Tube Couch

Figure 3: The Wingbacks

Figure 4: The Round Loungers

Figure 5: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up

Figure 6: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up

Figure 7: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up

Figure 8: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up, Colour Study in Orange

Figure 9: The Tube Couch is a playful space

Figure 10: Tube Couch party, space for four or more

Figure 11: Tube Couch seating example

Figure 12: Tube Couch party, space for four or more

Figure 13: Traditional wingback form vs. Wingbacks designed for privacy

Figure 14: Suggested angle of the Wingbacks

Figure 15: Comfort and Conversation in the Round Loungers

Figure 16: A Variety of lounging positions, face-to-face view, or individual position with shared view

Introduction

The influence of architecture on human emotions has long been recognized, but the influence of furniture has not been the subject of the same kind of attention.

What if living room furniture was more about living and less about watching television? What if, after a long day at work; you lounged in furniture that encouraged conversing and interacting with the important people in your life.

Most furniture design does not take into consideration how people actually use furniture when they socialize. This is influenced by the variety of ways in which furniture comes into our lives and reflects factors such as cost, size and convention.

Furniture is a fundamental part of our lives. We interact with it every day, it takes up space in our home, work and play environments and offers us a place to sit, set and store our daily lives. Given that we spend a great deal of time with furniture, how much do we really consider its influence? Edward Lucie-Smith argues, “furniture occupies a curiously ambiguous place among human artifacts. Strictly speaking, it is not necessary to human existence”(Lucie-Smith 7). Unlike shelter, furniture is not needed for survival, but it does add comfort and ease to our lives—often in such a way that it is considered a necessity.

In his book, *A Social History of Furniture Design*, John Gloag builds upon Lucie-Smith’s argument and compares our use of furniture today to the way that we consider the modern convenience of plumbing.

Furniture today is thought of primarily as equipment, as impersonal as plumbing and as functionally efficient as plumbing should be; something that may be easily removed or replaced, so that the surroundings of the home may be brought up to date periodically. (Gloag, 60)

The problem with this type of thinking is that furniture is not impersonal; it is an intimate part of our lives. What we choose to surround ourselves with reflects who we are and impacts our lives. Arguably, furniture is considered more for its aesthetic attributes than the social facilitation that it has the ability to provide.

Social Psychologist Albert Mehrabian goes so far as to contend that:

Many living rooms are failures for entertaining not only because they are not colourful and are poorly lit but also because room shapes or the type and arrangement of furniture seriously depresses arousal levels. Long couches, set along the walls at wide intervals prevent guests from facing each other at the proper angles and also introduce too much distance between them. (Mehrabian 90)

We have grown accustomed to this model as the norm for living room furnishing which allows for members of the household to all watch the television at the same rather than gather for face-to-face conversation.

The sofa still retains a major social role in the household, whether it be the single person curled up with a magazine, a group of young men drinking beer and watching football, or two young lovers kissing, the sofa can be a 'social centre' within the household. (Jordan 38)

While Jordan asserts that the sofa is social hub and the center of domestic bliss, Mehrabian points out that "couches are quite detrimental to social interaction" "Two people sitting on a couch are separated by 180 degrees and it is difficult for more than two people to orient themselves on a couch to face each other. Furthermore, when people are separated by more than 90 degrees,

conversation is found to be less positive (Mehrabian, 91). This negative effect on conversation when two people sit next to each other occurs because it is easier to break eye contact and loosen the cooperative bond (Augustin 75). Eye contact and being able to see facial features of the person you are conversing allows us to pick up on the non-verbal cues of communication.

The relationships we form with others contribute to feelings of belonging, and influences our overall mood and sense of well-being. In this most basic sense, “our interactions and relationships with other people form a network that supports us, makes our lives meaningful, and ultimately enables us to survive” (Media Lab Europe). If connectedness enhances our lives, how does furniture influence this? Can furniture provide connectedness by bringing people together and encouraging interaction? I argue that while furniture alone does not directly create connectedness with other people, it provides a place for communicating, interacting and forming relationships.

Communication as well as shared activities are essential to satisfying the human desire for socialization and interaction. Conversation is one way to feel connected to other people—an avenue to share experiences and to find similarities in others—and a deep conversation with someone, incorporating sharing and intimacy, increases emotional bonds. Sally Augustin convincingly argues that:

People talk to other people most readily when they can see each other’s eyes—we are gregarious creatures and find it hard to pass up a convenient opportunity to

socialize. It is hard for people to talk to others with whom they cannot make eye contact. To encourage discussion, seat people so that they can see each other's eyes. (Augustin 73)

Conversation and communication, involves much more than an exchange of words. Subtleties, such as eye contact and body language, are impossible to convey with text messages and instant messaging. While it is great to instant message or video chat with loved ones that are far away it falls short when more time is spent talking online than in person. Rather than making us more connected as it has been promised, technology seems to be isolating us. Perhaps it is not surprising that "people are reporting that they increasingly feel isolated from others" (Augustin 28). Our lives have become increasingly solitary, isolated with the streamlining of technology, however human beings need physical contact with other people in order to foster emotional connections. Humans need this 'connectedness', which is decreased by the way technology has altered communication. Given this need for connection, Weinschenk posits that "there is a certain type of happiness that humans can't get any other way than engaging in synchronous activity" which is often physical, such as dancing or singing, doing the same thing at the same time with people who are in close proximity (Weinschenk, 149). I argue that sharing space with someone, which is a form of shared activity and experience, is also important for feeling connected to another person.

By understanding what people require in order to communicate openly, honestly and effectively, an environment can be designed to suit those particular needs.

In their book, *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships*, Knapp and Vangelisti outline the four major components of any communication setting: the natural environment, architectural structure and design features, movable objects, and the presence or absence of other people. As they argue, “each of these components has the potential for facilitating or inhibiting certain kinds of communication” (Knapp 122). My three furniture projects are the movable objects described by Knapp and Vangelisti and it is these projects that explore how design features can influence the presence or absence of other people.

The built environment has incredible influence on our emotions and as Mehrabian has argued, “human beings can learn to manipulate their environments in order to make themselves happier, more comfortable, freer, and more productive” (Mehrabian viii). Because furniture is one of the components of a room that we can rearrange and position, it is a valuable tool in exploring the impact of a well-designed environment to enhance life experiences. Furniture is an integral part of our environment. By considering how furniture specifically can affect our emotional states and shape day-to-day interactions design psychology should be applied. This type of consideration is often applied to the discipline of architecture and I will show that furnishings need to be given the same level of consideration.

Within the context described above, I will explore the effect that furniture has on us in our environment using the examples of the Tube Couch, the Wingbacks,

and the Round Loungers. (See Figures 1-4) While design theory has placed considerable emphasis on the impact of the built environment on our well-being, I believe that there has not been enough consideration placed on the impact of furniture on our emotional lives.

Design Criteria and Definitions

This list of design criteria outlines the five requirements for personal and intimate conversation central to my projects. While not all points on the list must be met in order to create a setting conducive to conversation, the combination of various criteria results in a variety of settings which facilitate conversation and communication. Each of the three projects outlined here meet the different criteria in varying ways. Environmental Psychology is an interdisciplinary field of study concerned with how people interact with their surroundings and how this affects well-being. The following authors were the most applicable to furniture design: Sally Augustin, Albert Merhabian, and Robert Sommer. Gathering information in Environmental Psychology was essential for this project because it provided information about how the environment affects mood and how a well-designed space can influence emotions. In order to create a setting which facilitates conversation, one must understand how people communicate. Interpersonal Communications focuses on understanding how people interact, what is needed to relate to other people and factors contributing to desirable communication. Mark Knapp and Anita Vangelisti discuss the physical environment and how it influences communicative acts. Sensory design, Covered by Joy Malnar and Frank Vodvarka, include how tactility, appearance, sound are applied to materials and objects and how it is perceived. Colour theory, luminosity, light, shadow, pattern, movement and sound are some of the areas concerned with sensory design. By combining theoretical aspects of

Interpersonal Communications, Environmental Psychology and Sensory Design, I have identified key attributes which enhance communication and social interaction. These elements are: warm, informal, adaptable, private and close.

WARM: inviting and comfortable, perceived as friendly

When designing for communication, the objects should be familiar and approachable. Just as there can be hesitation in approaching unfamiliar places, which are much like unfamiliar people, familiar environments are approachable and allow for greater flexibility in communications (Knapp 126). Warmth in this sense is not about thermal heat, but designates spaces that are pleasant and welcoming. Communication is typically more personal and spontaneous when the environment is perceived as friendly, which would enhance feelings of comfort and relaxation encouraging people to linger (Knapp 124). If the surrounding is perceived as pleasant, positive communication both verbal and non-verbal is more likely to occur.

INFORMAL: playful and relaxed, not having strict rules

Mehrabian discusses the effect of formality on our moods and argues that people are more relaxed and comfortable in an environment that has low arousal, mild pleasure and that there is a degree of dominance over. If the space is boring, there is a tendency for people to engage in avoidance behaviors and seek to leave the space when possible (Mehrabian 23).

Reducing the perceptions of formality is one way to encourage spontaneous conversation because “as formality increases, we are more likely to find communication that has less breadth and depth” (Knapp 124). When environments are perceptibly informal, there are not as many rules in place and a relaxed atmosphere encourages playful interactions.

ADAPTABLE: movable and complying, able to change to suit conditions

Knapp and Vangelisiti discuss the importance of the ability to adapt one’s surroundings to suit the needs at the time, which can include “moving closer or farther away; arranging objects to create moods” (Knapp 122). Because most of the furniture we encounter on a day-to-day basis is static and lacks variation, it is a good idea to “select furnishings that are light, moveable and admit to several pleasant combinations”(Mehrabian 88). The ability to shift furniture around increases novelty and the feeling of dominance over our environment can negate the boredom and inflexibility that is a common problem in many living rooms (Mehrabian95).

When an environment or setting is perceived as unconstrained, it offers the possibility of adaptive use. This feeling of dominance allows people to control their experiences in a place, resulting in a greater level of satisfaction (Augustin 30). Having control over your environment allows for the manipulation of one’s

surroundings so it suits the desired activity, mood and function. People are often much less stressed when they feel in control (Augustin 119).

PRIVATE: enclosed and protected, not being seen or heard by others

In his book, *Personal Space: The Behavioral basis of design*, Robert Sommer devotes an entire chapter to the 'defense of privacy' which investigates territory and personal boundaries. Sommer also points out the importance of visual and auditory privacy to our well-being, while Augustin claims that audio privacy is the most important (Sommer 39, Augustin 29). Enclosed spaces lend themselves to more private settings, since when there is privacy spontaneous conversations are more likely (Augustin 29). Private spaces are often rejuvenating and enable quiet contemplation and intimate communication allowing us to share something special with others and open up to those we trust (Knapp 125). Beyond conversation, my furniture pieces can be thinking spaces, or study spaces, as privacy also fosters concentration.

Edward Hall argues that the additional strain of screening out distracting background noise can affect how we interact and form opinions of people. He provides a case study where there had been complaints about management, "when the reduction of the auditory interference made it possible to conduct a meeting without undue strain, complaints about the chairman ceased" (Hall 44). Furthermore, both Augustin and Knapp agree that privacy, especially auditory

privacy “not being heard or hearing others” impacts our sense of well-being (Augustin 29, Knapp 125).

CLOSE : intimate and personal, being in physical proximity

In *Hidden Dimension*, Hall outlines four different types of distances we encounter in social situations: intimate, personal, social and public zones (Hall 116). The relations of people in the intimate and personal distance zones are most relevant to my thesis. Each of these zones has two phases, the close and far phases. The intimate distance is associated with interactions between people that happen between zero and eighteen inches. The close phase of the intimate zone is zero to six inches and the far phase is six to eighteen inches. It is in the intimate phase that physical contact is most likely to occur and can be associated with lower speaking levels (Hall 118). Moderate voice levels are experienced in the personal zone when people are likely to experience physical contact, between eighteen and forty eight inches apart, topics of personal interest are usually discussed (Hall 120).

Distances are extremely important when designing for communication. About four and a half feet is the optimum distance for communication as anything beyond five and half feet conversation is strained (Mehrabian 90, Augustin 76). Face-to-face communication with too much distance between people can seem too formal or confrontational and being directly opposite to someone can increase the level of competitive behavior (Sommer 61). “Chairs faced obliquely

attenuate direct confrontation. A table between two chairs sets up a sort of barrier.” (Proshansky, 152). If the distance is close enough and a softer voice can be used, then the setting is perceived as less formal (Knapp 124, 127).

Lessons from a couch fort: a case study

The driving force behind my research was to find a way to create furniture where people felt comfortable and conversation flowed easily. With an opportunity to make a couch fort recently, the first time as an adult, I experienced something magical. What is it about the couch fort is so spectacular? It seems so simple, the couch fort, something that children make, and an intrinsically playful activity. The ability to adapt the surroundings into something that suited the purpose of fun was challenging and enjoyable. Constructing a couch fort facilitates conversation and enhances emotional bonds between playmates often erupting into laugh riots when attempts don't work. Being creative and working together coming up with different solutions while sharing the experience with others makes it special. The couch fort provides a break from the everyday environment, something temporary and novel that isn't precious. You can always make another one.

After researching Environmental Psychology, Sensory Design and Interpersonal Communications and compiling a list of design qualities that contribute to conversation, the couch fort provides a useful model for thinking about my thesis research.

The couch fort works with the principles of environmental psychology that posit how being able to shape individual experiences by creating an environment which can be suited to particular needs is comforting. In addition, the couch fort

speaks to the goals of interpersonal communications in the way the couch fort allows participants to create something with someone else while playfully holding secrets and sharing an intimate space.

The couch fort conforms perfectly to all five of the design criteria I have established for my realized furniture designs. It is **warm** because it creates a comfortable space when fabric is draped over furniture, creating a smaller, inviting space. There are no rules when it comes to fort building; it is temporary so there is no need to be precious with it, which makes it **informal**. The couch fort creates a room within a room thereby shrinking the distances between people and the objects they have made the fort with which fulfills the criteria of being **close**. It also creates a space that is **private** since couch forts are for sharing, mostly secrets. You are only going to invite in whom you feel comfortable with. You can also hide out in the couch fort- it is like a secret clubhouse in your living room. Finally, making a couch fort means that you have modified the space to meet your needs. You have control over your setting when you are making a couch fort, allowing it to be fully **adaptable**.

Furniture can be used as mini forms of architecture, creating spaces that we can control, because often we do not have much control over the architectural elements of a space we inhabit. Most of the furniture that we use in our daily life is static. For me furniture is not about 'the object' but the experience it creates. We lead busy lives, and it would be nice to incorporate a restorative pause.

Furniture can create spaces which assist in shaping experiences. When a sense of privacy and enclosure is considered furniture can create a room within a room; reducing or eliminating distracting elements outside of the immediate seating area. The purpose is to turn the user's attention inwards and create a warm and inviting space where intimate conversations can occur.

My objective is to create a space which will allow people to fully engage and interact with other people. It is a comfortable and uninterrupted space with only personal interaction as its goal. This is becoming ever more important in this digital age where most interactions are non-personal and conversations are had over the mediums of modern technology. I propose that furniture design can be a solution to this problem and provide a more meaningful and engaged way to connect with their loved ones.

What can we learn from couch forts?

There are lessons in the couch fort. Especially how children view and use space, approaching objects with aspects of play and possibility. It is an informal and private space that reduces the amount of stimulus from the outside world. It provides a relaxing space to hide out and take a break. The nice thing about a couch fort is that it is temporary. It can be changed, re-created, and moved around, it is not strict in its conception and only limited by available materials.

The important lesson to take from the couch fort is to make time for playful and private spaces. The element of play in our lives is not to be undermined by the

hustle and bustle of the working world. Motivated by the potential influence of furniture on our emotions and inspired by the lessons from a couch fort, these are playful explorations of furniture.

Design :Tube Couch

The Tube Couch was designed to create a room within a room, to cut out distractions and shift focus inwards. Through my design I have created a warm, intimate space where personal interaction can occur by reducing distraction from the outside world. The roundness allows for a variety of sitting positions and there is no right or wrong way to sit in the Tube Couch. The Tube Couch was designed with proximity and enclosure in mind and allows users to be close to each other, promoting conversation. The 60" diameter is an appropriate distance for two people to have a face-to-face conversation as it allows for the personal distance. As a result of my own testing I determined that it is not too small of a diameter to climb into yet maintains the desirable distance of less than 48" between the noses of the participants of a face-to-face conversation. (See Figures 5-7)

Because the true effect of the tube couch had to be gauged on experience, it was important to build full scale mock ups and to test out how the space felt. The mock up was extremely valuable for determining form and effect. The enclosed nature of the tube couch allows for a sense of privacy, and the open section at the top alleviates the feeling of it being too cave like, as it was in the mock up. It was apparent in the mock up phase that colour would be an important factor, as it would surround the participants. Taking notes from Mehrabian and his

suggestions for having a social space that is stimulating, and having a relative 'high load' while not being too overwhelming and simultaneously pleasant.

The upholstered interior allows for auditory privacy and also allows for visual interest in the design of the flutes which break up the space. The upholstery fabric provides a slight variation in colour as well as a soft, comfortable texture. I have chosen orange fabric to upholster the Tube Couch in because as Mahnke has argued, this shade is inviting and sociable (Mahnke 62). Mahnke breaks down the influence of the colour orange into the following categories: "Ceiling: Stimulating, attention-seeking. Walls: warm, luminous. Floor: activating, motion-oriented" (Mahnke 68). The Tube Couch encompasses all of these.

Design Criteria : Tube Couch

WARM -The colour of the tube couch has a great degree of impact on the perception of friendliness. Orange is the colour of fire and sunsets and has a radiant quality to it and may even enhance some skin tones (Mahnke 68).

Comparatively the feeling of the grey paper mock up and the orange upholstered final design the orange makes it very personable, due to the luminous quality of the colour orange. (See Figures 7&8)

INFORMAL- It is an unconventional shape and it invites the user in. The Tube Couch is incredibly playful and intimate. It offers a private space where you can get close to someone and share secrets. (Figure 9)

CLOSE- The distance of sitters within the tube allows for close face-to-face communication as well as adjacent body proximity. Depending on the persons in the tube they could have contact at the close phase of intimate distance, by being directly next to each other. The tube couch can accommodate up to six comfortably but at the close phase of the intimate zone, however four is a more likely number. (Figures 10-12)

PRIVATE - The tube couch provides audio privacy by deadening outside noise and reducing sight lines. The curved upholstered design muffles background noise, which can also be comforting as enclosed spaces denote privacy (Augustin 29).

ADAPTABLE- There are many ways you can sit in the tube couch. It also accommodates more than two people. There are no rules or expectations of how to sit in the tube couch.

Design :Wingbacks

Privacy has one of the most profound effects on our well-being and the Wingbacks were designed with privacy as the primary goal. The design allows you to see that someone is occupying the chair but not identify who they are. Originally conceptualized to accommodate a canopy system which would amplify the privacy effect, the enlarged wings make it difficult to see the occupants face or hear what they are saying. In the end the wings provided enough privacy that the canopy system was not essential but could be a later addition.

Because of the enlarged wings and oversized proportions, an impressive colour was required to ensure that the chairs had a strong visual presence without being too intimidating. I chose this elegant purple to complement the unexpected proportions of the chairs. This particular shade of purple is not overwhelming and was chosen for its dignified and subduing effect (Mahnke 64, 70). The upholstery design was chosen to coordinate with the aesthetics of the tube couch, as well as to emphasize the lines of the form.

The upholstery of the chairs also provide a sound dampening effect. I have observed that people express delight when they discover a quiet space within my Wingbacks. If background noise is reduced the setting is more pleasant, and people are more likely to be positive in an enjoyable setting (Hall 44, Merhabian 87). Furniture which reduces the strain of background noise while

simultaneously providing audio and visual privacy can enhance conversation by creating an uninterrupted space.

Design Criteria : Wingbacks

WARM – My Wingbacks are approachable and friendly in their unexpected proportions and whimsical presence. The large proportions of these chairs as well as the visual and auditory privacy that they provide aid to the comforting feel. The texture of the fabric and the use of foam create a soft space to be in.

INFORMAL- My Wingbacks are probably the most formal of the set of designs as it borrows aesthetics from an established chair form, yet the unconventional proportions and the purple upholstery lend themselves to being a less formal version of their traditional predecessors. (Figure 13)

CLOSE - It is important to note that my Wingback chairs are intended to relate to one another at a slight angle. (Figure 14) This angle allows for leg room, maintains a close distance and provides a visual break. If the chairs were situated in opposition to each other, it would be difficult to look anywhere BUT the person you are conversing without a graceful way to break eye contact. While conversation is enhanced in scenarios where eye contact can be made, it is also equally as important to provide other means of visual stimulus.

PRIVATE - The proportions of the wings allow for privacy as their design allow the outsider to see that they are occupied, but not by whom. They also provide a refuge and not being seen by other people and provide a buffer against background noise. Privacy also allows for activities that involve quiet contemplation and often encourage creativity (Augustin 29).

ADAPTABLE- The Wingbacks offer the least variation in how they can be sat in due to their conventional seat base. The chairs do offer the ability to use just one of them on their own, if the users chose not to use them in a conversation setting and provide a place for quiet contemplation.

Design :Round Loungers

The Round Loungers are designed with comfort in mind which facilitates putting the users at ease and creates a relaxed area for conversation. Conversation is typically more free flowing, honest, and intimate when the participants are comfortable and in an informal setting. The loungers allow for the greatest amount of adaptation of the three projects. The circular design of the chairs allows the user to adjust the amount of recline to the desired lounging position, which exerts control over the user's lounging experience and enhances the aspect of pleasure created when one feels that they have dominance over their environment. Having two separate chairs allow the users to determine if a shared view, that is chairs facing the same direction, or if a more engaged face-to-face setting, by having the chairs face each other, is more appropriate. The metal hoops emphasize the ability to rotate the chair into position and also fit nicely into the hand that allows for easy adjustment. A simple cradle system keeps the chairs in place, while allowing for easy adjustment of the amount of recline.

The hoops also provide a frame from which to hang lighting or other decorative objects, such as a mobile¹. A future addition of this project would be to create a removable canopy system which would enhance the close and private criteria,

¹By providing additional visual stimulus, ideally one that incorporates colour and motion, it adds interest to the immediate area while also allowing a graceful break in eye contact or conversation as well as potential topics for discussion (Augustin 86, Mehrabian 88).

and would work as a sun shade as these chairs lend themselves to outdoor applications.

The Round Loungers are upholstered in a design that complements the Tube Couch and Wingbacks. White for its colour because it has few negative connotations, in western cultures, and is usually associated with renewal and peace (Mahnke 65). A white fabric would not be appropriate as it would soil easily, however the leather is more durable and easier to clean.

WARM –The entire body is supported in the Round Loungers with a particular set of angles and proportions which have been successful and repetitive in other designs. The iconic Le Corbusier *LC4* chaise lounge chair and Human Touch's *Perfect Chair* also use similar angles, and these are also confirmed in ergonomic references (Panero, 129). Being comfortable can create more open and relaxed conversation.

INFORMAL- Unlike traditional forms of furniture, the amount of recline that is possible with these chairs makes for a very informal setting. The lounge proportions and angles used assist a relaxed body position. (Figure 15)

CLOSE- The design of the chairs allows for greater proximity between the users as well as a close side by side arrangement. Although not enclosed in a physical sense the metal hoops are designed to provide a visual delineation of space.

PRIVATE – The effect of privacy and enclosure would be amplified when a canopy system is used. The Round Loungers can be arranged to a close distance where a lower voice can be used.

ADAPTABLE- This project is the most adaptable out of the set of three. This design allows the user to adapt the amount of recline and orientation of the chairs individually. (Figure 16)

Design Conclusion

Furniture, when designed with people in mind, can positively affect how people converse and socialize, contributing to the level of satisfaction and happiness experienced on a day-to-day basis.

This exploration through furniture applies theories from environmental psychology, interpersonal communications, and sensory design. The environment and the objects within it have a profound impact on our lives, either making actions easier or more difficult, supporting or frustrating tasks. I have explored the effect of furniture within the environment and how it can facilitate personal interaction by designing with the attributes of being warm, informal, adaptable, private and close. These furniture projects explore the types of conditions needed for honest and open communication and desirable social interaction. The three projects which encompass this research by encouraging gathering, conversation, socializing and connectedness, are the Tube Couch, Wingbacks, and Round Loungers.

This furniture was influenced and inspired by the simple joy that a couch fort offers. The three projects were designed with a sense of enclosure, either built in or optional reducing stimulus from the outside world while providing privacy. The ability to control privacy is one of the most important types of control we can have, and when we have privacy that allows us to open up to people we trust.

The Tube Couch was installed in the Student Design Association's *Out of the Bag!* show in October 2010. It was heartwarming to see the instant smile that people had on their faces as soon as they climbed in. Reminiscent of childhood, playground slides, and concrete culverts adapted into a large enough space for an adult which is upholstered and comfortable. In this exploration of furniture the Tube Couch provides a socialization space for groups of people. It was also exciting to see up to six happy people packed in at one time. The large inviting size of the tube couch makes it appropriate for public spaces with open and spacious floor plans. Because the ends of the Tube Couch are open and it has the capacity for more than two people, it invites curiosity and other people into the space. People would be less likely to intrude on a conversation within the Wingbacks.

From my observations of people sitting in The Wingbacks, they seem to offer a sense of relief as soon as you sit down in them. Sitters are intrigued by the level of auditory privacy my chairs offer. These chairs lend themselves to being in a public space, with a lot of hustle and bustle, offering the sitter a quiet zone where anything beyond the purple upholstered wings, is temporarily suspended. Their impressive presence, yet manageable size, could also be used in residential spaces.

The Round Loungers were tested in the construction phase, even without upholstery on them the response of people sitting in them is that they are comfortable, followed up by inquires if they are rocking chairs. The circular design is intended for the variety of adjustment, and ability to enclose the space rather than act as rockers.

This research process and design criteria development has great potential to expand beyond Furniture for Conversation. This outcome specific application of psychology can be utilized in other areas such as furniture for dining or waiting areas. Continued research could lead to a teachable subject of Psychology of Furniture and its effects within the environment.

My investigation of Furniture for Conversation illustrates the capacity of furniture to promote and facilitate social interaction and conversation. By building upon the content of this thesis there are many opportunities to strengthen social and conversational interactions through thoughtful, considerate and compassionate furniture design.

Bibliography

Augustin, Sally. *Place Advantage: Applied Psychology for Interior Architecture*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009.

Conran, Terence. *The House Book*. London: Mitchell Beazley, 1974.

Crozier, W. Ray. *Manufactured Pleasures: Psychological Responses to Design*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994.

Gallagher, Winifred. *House Thinking: A Room-by-Room Look at How We Live*. 1st ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Gloag, John. *A Social History of Furniture Design, from B. C. 1300 to A. D. 1960*. London: Cassell, 1966.

Hall, Edward T. *The Hidden Dimension*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966.

Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens; a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

Jordan, Patrick W. *Designing Pleasurable Products an Introduction to the New Human Factors*. London: Taylor & Francis 2000.

Knapp, Mark L., and Anita L. Vangelisti. *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships*. 6th ed. Boston: Pearson Allyn& Bacon, 2009.

Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Furniture : A Concise History*. World of Art. London: Thames and Hudson, 1979.

Mahnke, Frank H. *Color, Environment, and Human Response: An Interdisciplinary Understanding of Color and Its Use as a Beneficial Element in the Design of the Architectural Environment*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996.

Mahnke, Frank H., and Rudolf H. Mahnke. *Color and Light in Man-Made Environments*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987.

Malnar, Joy Monice, and Frank Vodvarka. *Sensory Design*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Media Lab Europe. *Human Connectedness*
<<http://web.media.mit.edu/~stefan/hc/>> Accessed: May 2009.

Mehrabian, Albert. *Public Places and Private Spaces: The Psychology of Work, Play, and Living Environments*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.

Norman, Donald A. *The Design of Everyday Things*. 1st Basic paperback.ed. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

---. *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

Panero, Julius, and Martin Zelnik. *Human Dimension & Interior Space: A Source Book of Design Reference Standards*. New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1979.

Papanek, Victor J. *Design for the Real World; Human Ecology and Social Change*. 1st American ed. New York,: Pantheon Books, 1972.

Proshansky, Harold M., William H. Ittelson, and Leanne G. Rivlin. *Environmental Psychology: Man and His Physical Setting*. New York,: Holt, 1970.

RoAne, Susan. *Face to Face: How to Reclaim the Personal Touch in a Digital World*. 1st Fireside pbk.ed. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.

Smith, Peter F. *Architecture and the Human Dimension*. London: George Godwin Limited, 1979.

Sommer, Robert. *Personal Space; the Behavioral Basis of Design*. A Spectrum Book. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969.

---. *Social Design: Creating Buildings with People in Mind*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983.

Weinschenk, Susan. *100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People. Voices That Matter*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2011.



Figure 1: The Tube Couch



Figure 2: The Tube Couch



Figure 3: The Wingbacks



Figure 4: The Round Loungers



Figure 5: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up



Figure 6: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up



Figure 7: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up



Figure 8: Tube Couch 1:1 scale mock up, Colour Study in Orange



Figure 9: The Tube Couch is a playful space



Figure 10: Tube Couch party, space for four or more



Figure 11: Tube Couch seating example



Figure 12: Tube Couch party, space for four or more



Figure 13: Traditional wingback form vs. Wingbacks designed for privacy



Figure 14: Suggested angle of the Wingbacks



Figure 15: Comfort and Conversation in the Round Loungers

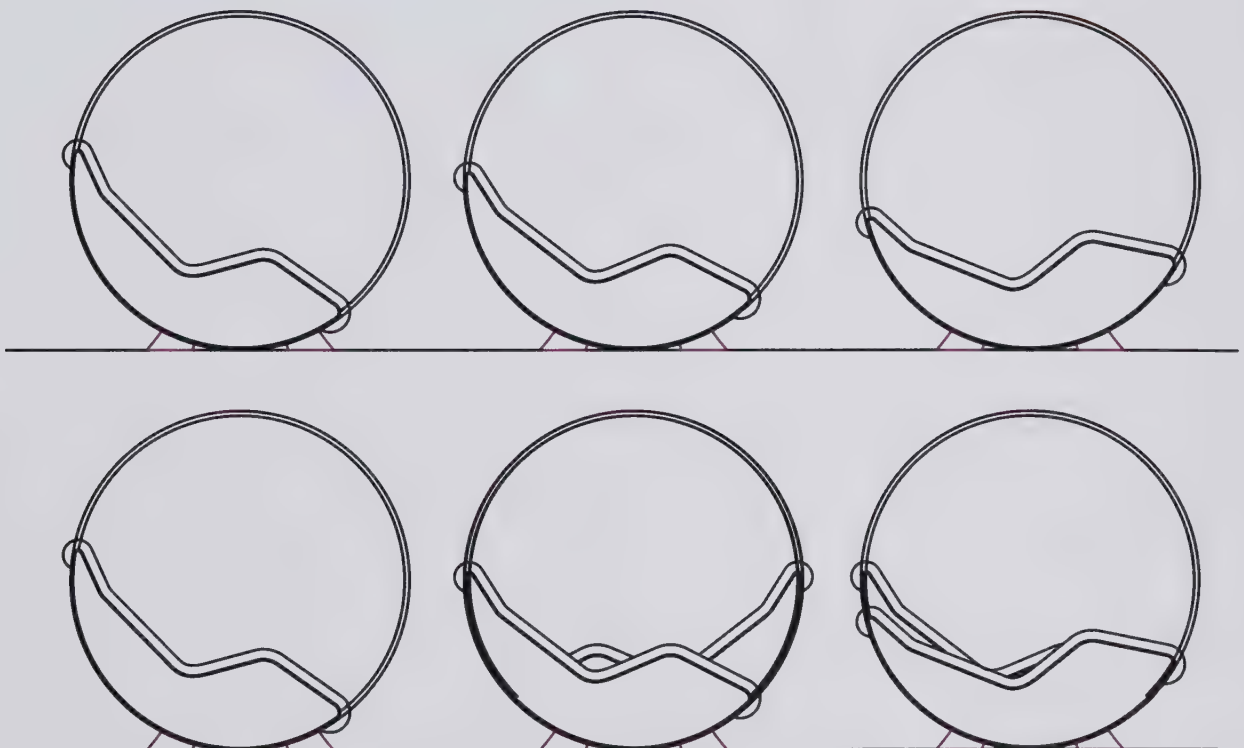
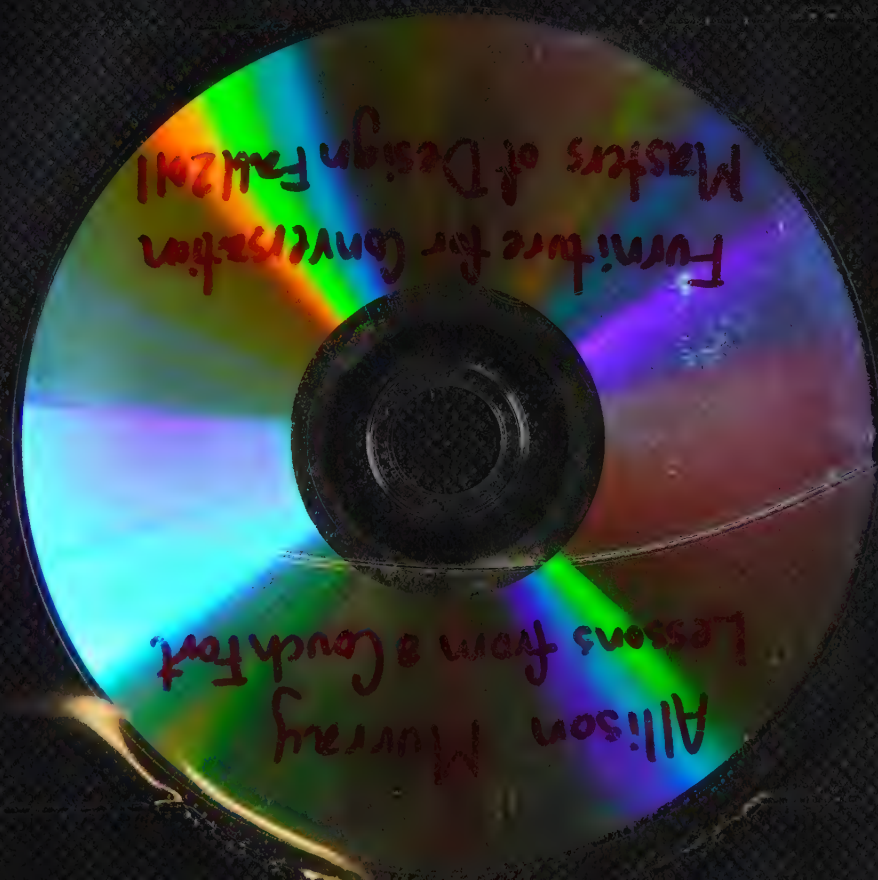
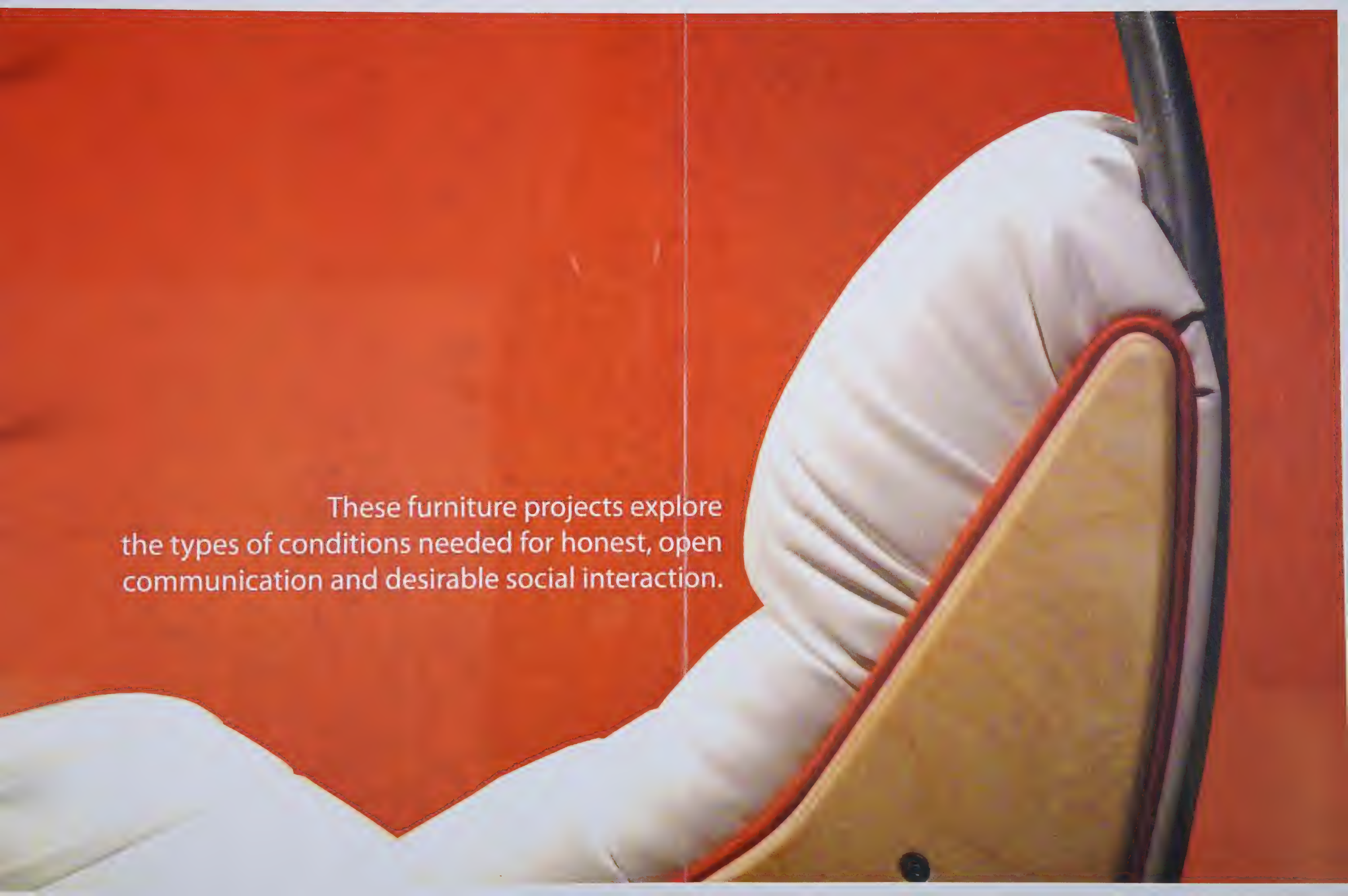


Figure 16: A Variety of lounging positions, face-to-face view, or individual position with shared view

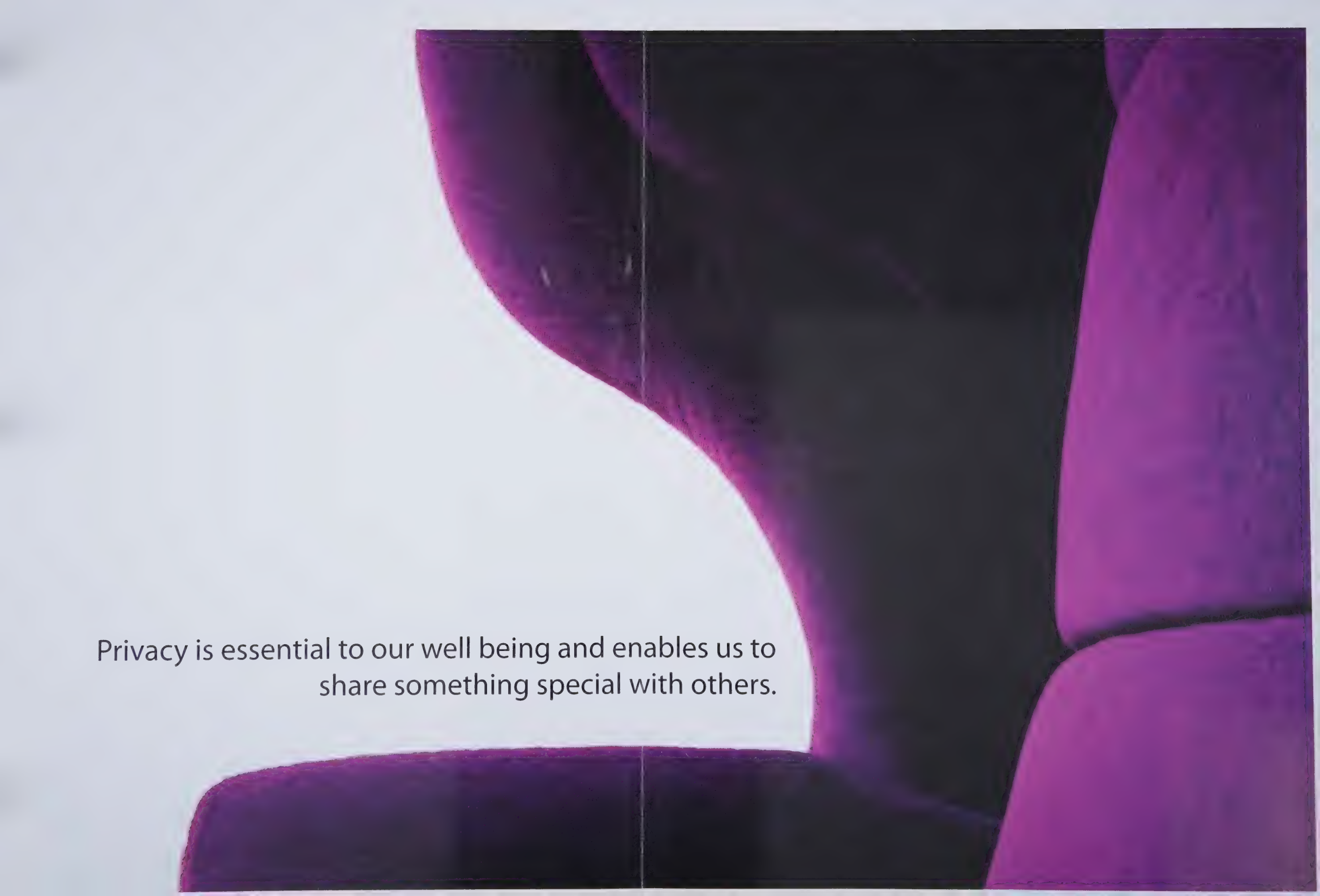


Furniture for Conversation
Masters of Design Fall 2011


Allison Murray
Lessons from a Couch Fort.



These furniture projects explore
the types of conditions needed for honest, open
communication and desirable social interaction.

A close-up photograph of a plush, purple velvet sofa. A white, curved object, possibly a piece of furniture or a decorative element, is positioned on the left side of the sofa, partially obscuring it. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the velvet and the smooth surface of the white object.

Privacy is essential to our well being and enables us to
share something special with others.

A circular opening in a red brick wall, looking out onto a bright white background. The bricks are arranged in a radial pattern, creating a tunnel-like effect. The text is centered within the white circle.

What if living room furniture was less about
watching television and more about
conversing and interacting with the
important people in your life?

